Iran's 2009 Presidential Elections

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Summary

On June 12, 2009, following a heated campaign between reformist candidate Mir Hussein Musavi and incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iranians turned out in record numbers to vote in the presidential election. Shortly after the polls closed, the Interior Minister announced that President Ahmadinejad had been reelected by a 62% margin. The announcement was followed by allegations of vote rigging and election fraud and prompted supporters of leading reformist candidate Mir Hussein Musavi and others to hold public demonstrations in several major cities of a size and intensity unprecedented since the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Despite a government ban on unauthorized public gatherings, protests have reportedly continued every day since the election. Restrictions on foreign and domestic journalists, reported disruptions of mobile phone networks, limited accessibility of some internet sites, mass arrests, and clashes between civilian protestors and Basij forces have garnered international attention and increased concerns about the Iranian government's apparent disregard for human rights and basic civil liberties.

Regardless of the actual election results, the current stand-off between the government and opponents of the election outcome has caused observers to speculate about how this stalemate will be resolved, and what the outcome might mean for U.S. efforts to resolve the issue of Iran's nuclear weapons program, its support for terrorism, and other national security concerns.

This report will be updated to reflect recent events. For more information and background on Iran, see CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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Recent Developments

In his speech on Friday, June 19, Supreme Leader Khamenei demanded an end to the protests, reiterated his support for President Ahmadinejad, and accused foreign "enemies" of interfering in Iran's domestic affairs. Protests continued in Tehran and in other cities, however, and on Saturday, June 20, Iranian Basij and Revolutionary Guard forces reportedly used tear gas and live ammunition to disperse crowds. Ten deaths were reported, bringing the unofficial toll to at least 17, although many speculate that violence between police and military forces and the protestors may be more widespread and lethal than media reports indicate. On June 22, reports indicated that the Basij and Revolutionary Guard have been deployed throughout Tehran as the government crackdown on demonstrations continues to intensify. In addition, the Iranian government also appears to be continuing its arrests of reformist leaders. On June 21, members of former President Rafsanjani's family were reportedly arrested, causing speculation that rifts in Iran's religious leadership could be widening.[1]

On Saturday, June 20, the Guardian Council held a meeting with all presidential candidates to discuss the election outcome and fraud allegations. Reformist candidate Mir Hussein Musavi did not attend the meeting on Saturday on the grounds that he has already rejected any solution to the current stand-off other than a new election.[2] Reports circulated on Monday, June 22 that the number of ballots cast in at least 50 voting stations as reported by the government exceeds the number of registered voters in that area. The Guardian Council acknowledged the "irregularities," but insisted that they in no way would have changed the election outcome.[3]

As information leaks out of Iran despite a government ban on foreign journalists and restricted access to some internet sites, it is becoming clear to some observers that the Iranian government may have chosen to impose the election outcome by force. Images and available information have heightened international concerns that the human rights situation in Iran is further deteriorating, and have raised questions about the extent of the Iranian government's campaign to end the protests and silence the opposition.

In response to increased violence against the Iranian protesters and amid some criticisms of his prior remarks, President Obama called upon the government of Iran to "stop all violent and unjust actions against its own people" and stated that, "The Iranian people will ultimately judge the actions of their own government. If the Iranian government seeks the respect of the international community, it must respect the dignity of its own people and govern through consent, not coercion."[4] Many observers believe that President Obama is attempting to balance the need to condemn the violence against the protestors with the need to avoid the perception of U.S. interference, which some worry could prompt the Iranian government to clamp down further on

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[1] Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani currently presides over the Assembly of Experts, a powerful body of clerics that has the authority to remove the supreme leader by a two-thirds vote.

[2] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP2009062011002, "Iran: Text of Musavi's Letter to the Guardian Council," Tehran *Qalam* (in Persian), June 20, 2009.

[3] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP20090622950080, "Iran Guardian Council Spokesman: 'No Major Violations' in Vote Counting," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1*, June 22, 2009.

[4] The President's Statement on Iran, June 20, 2009, available online at http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/The-Presidents-Statement-on-Iran/.

freedom of expression as well as jeopardize U.S. efforts to engage Iran on the issue of its nuclear program.

Iran's 2009 Presidential Election

The reported outcome of the June 12, 2009 presidential election in Iran prompted public demonstrations in several major cities of a size and intensity unprecedented since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The announcement that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected by a 62% margin was followed by allegations of vote rigging and election fraud. Supporters of leading reformist candidate Mir Hussein Musavi and others continue to stage large protests in the streets of Tehran and other major cities that have drawn international attention. The actions taken by the Iranian government in the hours following the election, ongoing demonstrations, arrests, and clashes between civilians and Iran's paramilitary Basij forces have led some observers to argue that Iran's political dynamics have shifted considerably, and that the relationship between the government of the Islamic Republic and its citizens has been fundamentally shaken. While some analysts have speculated about military coups, color revolutions, and the future of the Iranian regime, others have reserved judgment about the likelihood of various potential short term developments because of the unpredictability inherent in the dynamic situation prevailing across Iran at this time. Iran's institutions and centralized decision making are opaque, and outside observation and analysis is further hampered by the fact that the Iranian government has restricted access to foreign and domestic journalists and interrupted the availability of mobile phone service and various internet sites and services, limiting access to reliable information on the situation in Iran and compounding international concerns.

The short term effects of the election and its aftermath on Iran's political system and social contract are difficult to foresee. It is not clear at this point whether widespread public anger over the election outcome will lead to a wider challenge of the core principles of the Islamic Republic, and much may depend on the decisions of officials, candidates, and citizens in the days and weeks ahead. Regardless of the short term outcome, many analysts agree that the events surrounding the 2009 Iranian presidential elections have upset the balance between the official and civil spheres of Iranian society and will have long term implications for both the government and the people of Iran and for U.S. policy.[5]

Candidates and Campaigns

In 2009, nearly 500 candidates for Iran's presidency filed their candidacy with the Guardian Council.[6] On May 20, 2009, the council announced that four candidates had been approved: incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, conservative Mohsen Reza'i, reformist Mir Hussein Musavi, and reformist Mehdi Karrubi.

Social and political restrictions are often eased in Tehran during campaign season, but observers remarked that public activity this year was notably more energetic than would be expected. Some

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[5] For more information and background on Iran, see CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[6] The Guardian Council is a 14-member body appointed by the supreme leader and responsible for overseeing elections, among other things.

attribute this shift to the four years of crackdowns on social freedoms that have characterized President Ahmadinejad's term in office.[7] Others attribute the pre-election atmosphere to increased public tension between the candidates in the days leading up to the election, when the campaign became increasingly acrimonious.

During the week of June 3, 2009, the candidates participated in six live debates. The debate between incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and reformist candidate Mir Hussein Musavi was particularly heated, most notably because of Ahmadinejad's open criticism of Musavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard.[8] The debates offered the public an opportunity to observe fierce exchanges between the candidates for the first time in a presidential election and reportedly were watched by 40 to 50 million viewers, according to Iranian media reports.[9]

On June 9, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president who now heads two powerful oversight bodies, issued an open letter complaining about the silence of Khamenei following the "insults, lies, and false allegations" by Ahmadinejad during the campaign debates.[10] It is rare in Iran for senior leaders to publicly criticize the supreme leader and many observers viewed the letter as a reflection of the intensity of the campaigns. Others perceive that Rafsanjani, who is often at odds with the Khamenei and lost the 2005 presidential race to Ahmdinejad, may be interested in forming an alternate power center in the government.

Musavi appeared to experience a surge in public support in the final days of the campaign. The night before the election, on June 11, Musavi supporters reportedly formed a human chain on a main thoroughfare through Tehran.[11] The mass rally prompted some analysts and observers to speculate that Ahmadinejad's chances at reelection were dwindling. Some reports that the rural and urban poor population of Iran was shifting its support away from Ahmadinejad also surfaced in the week before the election. Many attributed this to increases in inflation and unemployment, compounded by international sanctions and the global financial crises that had disproportionately affected the poor, despite increases in wages and pensions provided under the Ahmadinejad government.[12]

The large rallies in favor of Musavi during the last days of the campaign may have caused alarm among some factions of the Iranian government.[13] Prior to the election, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander General Mohammad Ja'fari publicly stated that any attempt at a

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[7] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP2009061295001, "Editorial Says Entire Nation Will Win With Musavi Victory In Iran's Election," *E'temad Online*, June 10, 2009. See also Robert F. Worth, "In Iran, Harsh Talk as Election Nears," *New York Times*, June 8, 2009.

[8] Musavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard, a political scientist and former chancellor of Alzahra University in Tehran, played a visible role in his campaign and garnered much support from female voters, an unconventional role in Iranian politics as wives of candidates have not in the past appeared at campaign events.

[9] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document FEA20090610861590 "Iranian Election TV Debates Signal More Balanced Coverage," *BBC Monitoring*, June 10, 2009.

[10] See "Iranian Conservative Media Angry as Rafsanjani Lays Into Ahmadinejad," *BBC Monitoring*, June 10, 2009 and U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP20099610950037, "Iranian President to Reply to Accusations Raised in Debates," *IRNA*, June 10, 2009. See also Thomas Erdbrink, "Ex-Iranian President Criticizes Ayatollah," *New York Times,* June 10, 2009.

[11] Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, "Huge Campaign Rallies Snarl Tehran," *New York Times*, June 11, 2009.

[12] See Thomas Erdbrink, "Rural Iran May Shift Its Loyalty, *Washington Post*, June 7, 2009.

[13] See, for example, Marc Lynch, "Could There Be a Musavi Effect," *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2009.

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velvet revolution in Iran would be crushed.[14] The statement further fueled speculation that the regime felt threatened by the apparent popularity of Musavi in the last days of the campaign.

As observers watched the campaign unfold, most predicted a close race between Musavi and Ahmadinejad and many anticipated that a run-off would be necessary to determine a winner. Many observers also agreed that voter turnout may tip the election in favor of Musavi. During past elections, low voter turnout has been due in part to boycotts on the part of reform-minded Iranians, including many Iranian Americans who are eligible to vote. The Iranian system, in which the Guardian Council chooses which candidates are eligible to run, has in the past led some Iranians to feel that they have no attractive choice among the candidates.

Election and Results

On June 12, following the heated campaign between Musavi and Ahmadinejad, Iranians went to the polls. Record voter turnout was reported throughout the day and the Interior Ministry ordered that voting centers stay open to accommodate those waiting to vote.[15] Many observers were optimistic that pro-reform segments of the population, who had boycotted elections in the past, had gone to the polls in favor of Musavi. Large campaign rallies prior to the election had even sparked discussion of a possible "Green Revolution." As the polls closed, however, the prospects began to dim for a Musavi victory, and for a popularly-accepted election outcome. As the polls closed, police and paramilitary (Basij) forces reportedly were deployed throughout Tehran, locking down the Interior Ministry where votes were being counted. Internet sites and mobile phones were also reportedly disabled. Less than three hours after the polls closed, the Interior Ministry announced that the election results were in and that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won, capturing 62% of the vote. The Interior Ministry also reported that 39 million votes were cast (about 85% of Iran's eligible voters), an unprecedented turnout.[16]

Following the announcement by the Interior Ministry, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a statement congratulating President Ahmadinejad, which most observers interpreted as a certification of the election results. Khamenei said the "miraculous hand of God" was evident in the "great epic" of the election.[17] Both Ahmadinejad and Musavi claimed victory as the announcement was made, even before the Guardian Council certified the results.

Allegations of Fraud

Since no independent international observers were present for Iran's elections, it is difficult to ascertain the extent of alleged vote rigging or election violations that may have taken place. The expulsion of most foreign journalists from Iran and the government's interruption of mobile and

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[14] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP20090611950041, "Iran: Candidate Musavi Warns Against IRGC, Basij 'Interference' in Election," *Farda* in Persian (Tehran), June 11, 2009.

[15] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP20090612950172, "Iranian Governors-General Authorized to Extend Voting Time," *Voice of the Islamic Republic Iran Radio* in Persian, June 12, 2009.

[16] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP2009061350119, *IRNA* (Tehran), June 13, 2009.

[17] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP2009061350138, "Leader Hails Iranians' Massive Turnout in Election," *Fars News Agency* (Tehran), June 13, 2009.

internet communication have further complicated efforts to gain a clear picture of the events surrounding the election and its aftermath.

While many democracy promotion groups and NGOs have criticized the elections process in Iran, Iran's election procedures have been relatively well codified and in force for decades.[18] However, in the 2009 presidential election, doubts about the wide margin of victory reported for Ahmadinejad have overshadowed a number of serious procedural irregularities reported on election day, which are the subject of the formal complaints filed by the defeated candidates.

The Guardian Council has reportedly received and is investigating nearly 650 poll complaints from the three losing candidates. Musavi's formal complaints include: the heads of governors' offices sabotaged the issuance of identification cards to electoral observers before the ballots were collected and counted manually; ballot papers were not distributed properly in Shiraz and Tabriz; additional television campaigning was allowed for Ahmadinejad; the headlines of agencies including Rajanews, Fars, and IRNA focused on Ahmadinejad's victory in the election; and Article 40 of the Criminal Code regarding army-related crimes was broken through the involvement of Basij members in Ahmadinejad's campaign meetings.[19] Karrubi has expressed similar concerns.

Conservative candidate Mohsen Reza'i has also filed formal complaints, which some have perceived as an indication that it is not just reformist candidates and supporters who are dissatisfied with the results. According to the official result totals he received 678,000. He argues that he received between at least 5.3 and 7 million votes and that some estimates could be as high as 9 million. He says that his claim is based on his observers' reports from polling stations, information collected from 1,000 ballot boxes by his electoral headquarters, official opinion polls held in the country, and remarks addressed to him by voters and members of his electoral headquarters.[20]

Taken together, doubts about the margin of victory and concerns over perceived fraud stemming from procedural violations are fueling the largest protests since the Iranian Revolution and creating international concerns about the legitimacy of the election results. Initially, the candidates, the Iranian people, and many who followed the election expressed doubts that the record 39 million votes cast could have been counted in such a short time, especially in light of reports that voting times were extended. Others have pointed to additional irregularities. While individual reports are difficult to verify, some reports suggest that, in some cases, ballot boxes were picked up by Interior Ministry officials before polling places closed which would mark a change in election procedures whereby ballots are typically counted by officials at the local level.[21]

Khamenei urged the Guardian Council on June 15 to examine seriously the allegations of vote rigging, but urged the candidates to pursue their complaints through legal channels. He went on to

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[18] For information on Iran's election law and procedures, see the International Foundation for Election Systems Election Guide for Iran, available at: http://www.electionguide.org/country-news.php?ID=103.

[19] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP20090615950012, "Musavi Files Formal Complaint Against Result in Iran's Presidential Election," *Fars News Agency* (Tehran), June 14, 2009.

[20] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP20090615950012, "Musavi Files Formal Complaint Against Result in Iran's Presidential Election," *Fars News Agency* (Tehran), June 14, 2009.

[21] See Eric Hooglund, "Iran's Rural Vote and Election Fraud," Tehran Bureau, June 17, 2009, available online at: http://tehranbureau.com/2009/06/17/irans-rural-vote-and-election-fraud/.

state that the probe into vote-rigging allegations would be completed by June 25.[22] Musavi has said that invalidating the election is the only way to regain the people's trust in the regime and rejected outright the Guardian Council's offer to recount some of the votes.[23] Some observers dismissed the investigation into the election results as an attempt to provide a cooling off period for the demonstrators and dissatisfied public, rather than a legitimate review of the results. The Council has reportedly invited all the presidential candidates to a meeting scheduled to be held on Saturday, June 20; it is unclear whether one or all will attend.[24]

Some observers argue that the election results could be valid, despite the appearance of irregularities. They support this assertion with the claim that the young, liberal demographic in Iran is much smaller than it is often portrayed and that Ahmadinejad enjoys widespread support among the rural and urban poor, a more significant group in terms of size. These analysts also question the reliability of the polls prior to the election that indicated a close race. Others say that Ahmadinejad is often underestimated, as he was in 2005, and that his message of piety and anti-corruption coupled with his hard line on national security issues are both popular among the majority of Iranians. Others have argued that election fraud on such a massive scale would have involved many levels of the government and would be difficult to perpetrate and conceal.[25]

Other analysts assert that the allegations of fraud are likely true, and that the regime had motivation to interfere with the results. These analysts argue that the Iranian government might have felt sufficiently threatened by the success of Ahmadinejad's reformist opponents to mobilize a segment of the population that in large part boycotted the last elections. Some analysts have speculated that Khamenei engineered the election results in Ahmadinejad's favor so drastically in an effort to avoid a close election that could have been contested. Others argue that Khamenei wanted to send a political message to the U.S. and others that overtures to the Iranian public did not sway Iran from its ideology—a commitment to the nuclear program and an approval of Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric about Israel—and that discussions with the U.S. are not perceived by the Iranian people as a prize to be won. Some agree that Khamenei miscalculated, either by misjudging popular opinion or out of paranoia over suspected regime change efforts on the part of the U.S. and the West.[26]

Regardless of the actual election results, the public demonstrations on election night and continued protests in major cities across Iran have caused observers to speculate about how the current stand-off between the government and Musavi's supports will be resolved, and what the outcome might mean for U.S. efforts to resolve the issue of Iran's nuclear weapons program, its support for terrorism, and other national security concerns.

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[22] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP20090615950044, "Iran's Supreme Leader Says Musavi's Letter to be Given Careful Consideration," *Islamic Republic of Iran News Network Television (IRINN)*, June 15, 2009.

[23] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document GMP20090614647001, "Musavi Demands Elections Cancelled; Karrubi Rejects Ahmadinezhad's Win," *Al-Arabiyah* Television (Dubai), June 13, 2009.

[24] "Iran Probes 646 Poll Complaints," *BBC News*, June 18, 2009.

[25] See George Friedman, "Western Misconceptions Meet Iranian Reality," Stratfor Geopolitical Weekly, June 15, 2009.

[26] See, for example, Suzanne Maloney, "Reacting to Iran's Disputed Presidential Election Outcome," Brookings.edu, June 15, 2009, and Mehdi Khalaji, Patrick Clawson, Michael Singh, and Mohsen Sazegara, "Iran's 'Election': What Happened? What Does It Mean?, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch #1537: Special Policy Forum Report, June 18, 2009.

Aftermath

Demonstrations in Iran

Shortly after the election results were announced, Iran's interior ministry issued a ban on unauthorized public gatherings.[27] Despite the warning, protests have reportedly continued every day since the election in Tehran and other major cities—including Mashhad, Tabriz, Shiraz, and Isfahan.[28] Restrictions on journalists and government efforts to restrict telecommunications have made it difficult to know the scope of the public protests, but most accounts indicate numbers in the hundreds of thousands or more in Tehran. A counter demonstration in support of President Ahmadinejad also was reported, but most estimates indicate that it was significantly smaller than those in protest of the results—less than 10,000 people. Some media outlets alleged that the images of the Ahmadinejad rally were doctored to inflate the apparent size of the crowd.[29] Reports of arrests, injuries, and deaths are also difficult to substantiate, but have gained international attention and raised concerns about how the current stand-off between the government and the demonstrators might end. As the momentum reportedly continues, many observers are making comparisons with the days leading up to the Iranian revolution, and others express concerns that Iran might be nearing a "Tiananmen moment," in which the government ends protests with a massive show of force.[30]

At least 100 reformists reportedly were arrested on June 14 as public unrest mounted over the election results. Some of them reportedly have been released. On Sunday June 14, Iran's acting police chief, Ahmadreza Radan, gave the state press service an update on the arrests of protesters, and assured the public that "in the interrogation of related rebels, we intend to find the link between the plotters and foreign media."[31]

Musavi's first public appearance after the election was at a rally in Tehran's Revolution Square on Monday June 15, ending rumors of house arrest that circulated when he failed to show up for a planned press conference on June 13. The demonstrations were reportedly peaceful with no visible police presence. As the peaceful demonstration ended, a group was reported to attempt to set fire to the Basij compound away from the heart of the gathering. Basij members opened fire on the crowd from the roof of the facility. At least seven people were reportedly killed in the clash, and reports have since surfaced of other deaths and injuries, although the exact count is unknown.[32]

On the morning of June 15, fighting was reported at Tehran University, where students reportedly threw rocks and bricks at police and set fire to vehicles. The police reportedly used tear gas and plastic bullets to disperse the protesters, and reportedly raided university dormitories on both

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[27] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document IAP20090613950098, " Iran's Interior Minister Warns Against Public Gatherings Without Permits," *Tehran Islamic Republic of Iran News Network Television (IRINN)*, June 13, 2009.

[28] "Iran Opposition Keeps Up Pressure," *BBC News*, June 16, 2009.

[29] David Clark Scott, "Iran's pro-Ahmadinejad media: Using Fake Crowd Photos?" *International News Editor*, June 17, 2009.

[30] Neil MacFarquhar, "Iran's Latest Protests are Seen as Toughest to Stop," *New York Times*, June 16, 2009.

[31] Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, " Unrest Deepens as Critics are Detained," *New York Times*, June 15, 2009.

[32] Ian Black and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iran Uprising Turns Bloody," *The Guardian* (UK), June 16, 2009.

nights. Majles (Parliament) Speaker Ali Larijani condemned the raids, placing the blame on the Interior Ministry. Additional overnight raids were reported by the BBC on June 17.[33]

According to the BBC, on June 16 as night fell, residents of Tehran shouted protest messages from their rooftops, a scene "not witnessed since the final days of the Shah." On June 18, demonstrators staged a silent protest, mourning those who were injured and lost in the earlier protests.[34]

In addition to Musavi, other reformist leaders have joined the protests against the election outcome. Former President Mohammad Khatami's moderate clerical group, the Association of Combatant Clergy, issued a statement warning that "if this process becomes the norm, the republican aspect of the regime will be damaged and people will lose confidence in the system." Khatami also apologized to the Iranian people for his failure to protect their votes.[35]

On June 19, Supreme Leader Khamenei spoke at Friday prayers. In his address, he demanded an end to the protests and stated that political leaders would be held responsible for any violence. While he did not announce that the probe into the allegations of election fraud was completed, he did express his support for Ahmadinejad and seemed to reiterate his commitment to the election outcome stating that "there is 11 million votes difference...How can one rig 11 million votes?" He went on to criticize Great Britain and other "enemies" of Iran, stating that: "Some of our enemies in different parts of the world intended to depict this absolute victory, this definitive victory, as a doubtful victory."[36]

Opponents of the election outcome have pledged to stage new demonstrations on Saturday, raising concerns about possible government responses if Khamenei's demand that the protests end is not met. Many observers are beginning to frame the current stand-off in terms of a test of resolve, questioning how far the regime is willing to go to quell public unrest and how much Musavi and his supporters are willing to endure in order to see that their demands are met.

International Response

World wide, attention has focused on the events unfolding in Iran. Demonstrations took place in Western Europe and in other regions to protest the election outcome or the use of force against the demonstrators in Iran. Iranian expatriates also joined the protests. In the United Arab Emirates, protesters gathered in front of the Iranian consulate in Dubai to protest alleged election abuses. The consulate denied that any protests had taken place. After protests were held for five consecutive days, UAE authorities ordered the protestors to disperse.[37]

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[33] U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document, "New Protests Over Iran Elections, Public Media Revolt," *Kuwait KUNA Online*, June 17, 2009 and *BBC News*, June 17, 2009.

[34] "Masses Mourn Protesters in Iran," *BBC News*, June 18, 2009.

[35] "Khatami's Clerical Group Urges Annulling Iran Poll Results," *Associated Foreign Press*, June 13, 2009.

[36] "Ayatollah Demands End to Protests," *BBC News*, June 19, 2009 and U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Feature FEA20090619863000, "Iran: Leader Khamene'i Calls for End to Protests," *Islamic Republic of Iran News Netwrok Television (IRINN),* June 19, 2009.

[37] Nour Sumaha, "Dubai Bans Iran Protests," *The National* (Abu Dhabi), June 17, 2009.

While some leaders offered congratulations to Ahmadinejad after the election,[38] others have withheld their felicitations until the Guardian Council's election probe is completed. The international community, particularly the United States and the European Union, has now focused its attention on the public demonstrations in Iran, but most official statements have been cautious, likely to avoid the appearance of interference in Iran's domestic affairs. The European Union expressed concerns about the alleged irregularities, adding that it "expects the new Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran will take its responsibility towards international community and respect its international obligations."

Britain's Foreign Secretary David Miliband also expressed concerns about the elections in Iran, saying that Britain had "followed carefully, and admired, the passion and debate" during the election and that the reports of irregularities and accusations of fraud were "a matter for the Iranian authorities to address" and that "our priority is that Iran engages with the concerns of the world community, above all on the issue of nuclear proliferation."[39]

U.S. Response

The Obama Administration's response has been cautious. President Obama expressed "serious concern" about the events in Iran and the allegations of election fraud. He also indicated after the election that he would pursue his policy of engaging with Iran to find a solution to the nuclear issue regardless of the outcome of the election. Some analysts fear, however, that recent events have diminished the prospects for diplomacy, particularly as use of the Basij to violently confront civilian protestors renewed concerns about Khamenei's disregard for human rights and basic civil liberties.

At a State Department press conference on June 17, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the people of Iran deserve to have their voices heard and votes counted, and reiterated the position of other Administration officials that it is for the Iranians to determine how best to resolve the current situation in Iran. She also expressed the Administration's intent to pursue engagement regardless of the election outcome.

The U.S. government's response has been praised by some who argue that avoiding any appearance of involvement or meddling in Iranian affairs is the most likely choice to avoid provoking a harsh response from the Iranian government, one that would likely further endanger the lives of the demonstrators. These arguments tend to highlight the nationalist tendencies of Iranians from all parts of the political spectrum, particularly with regard to the complex history of intervention by the United States and other powers in Iran's domestic affairs. Others have criticized President Obama's response as too conciliatory toward Iran's existing leadership, particularly what some view as a lack of a strong enough condemnation of the use of force against civilians.

On June 16, 2009, President Obama drew criticism after saying in an interview with CNBC and the *New York Times* that, from an American national security perspective, there may not be a significant difference between Ahmadinejad and Musavi. He went on to say that the United States

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[38] Among those offering congratulations were the leaders of Syria, Lebanon, Indonesia, the Palestinian Authority, Turkey, Afghanistan, Russia, China, Iraq, and Head of Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council Abdul Aziz al-Hakim.

[39] U.S. Open Source Center Document EUP20090614086006, "Britain's Miliband Comments on Iranian Election," *London Foreign and Commonwealth Office*, June 13, 2009.

is going to be dealing with an Iranian regime that has historically been hostile to the United States. Critics of the statement argue that the President may be viewing the events in Iran solely through the lens of the nuclear issue.[40] Other analysts have argued that if Obama does not offer a stronger statement on the current situation it may be perceived by Iranians as a green light for Khamenei and the IRGC to use force to dispel the demonstrations.[41]

On June 19, the U.S. House of Representatives passed 405-1 H.Res. 560, which expresses support for Iranian citizens and "condemns the ongoing violence against demonstrators by the Government of Iran and pro-government militias, as well as the ongoing government suppression of independent electronic communication." The Senate also passed two measures— S.Res. 193 and S.Res. 196—which express support for Iranian citizens who "embrace freedom, human rights, civil liberties and rule of law" and which express the sense of the Senate on freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression in Iran.

Possible Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Policy

There is much debate about where the current situation in Iran could lead, with some experts predicting significant changes in Iran's political and social structure, and others arguing the Iranians at present do not appear to be seeking or experiencing a wholesale change in the basic nature of their government. Among those predicting significant change, some analysts are arguing a brewing "green revolution" is about to unfold in Iran. They cite the continued momentum of the protests, and say that the damage done by the regime to its own legitimacy is irreversible. Other observers have stated that the circumstances surrounding the election amount to a military coup, orchestrated by Khamenei and his allies in the military establishment. Both groups maintain that the current situation in Iran has caused or will cause significant changes that may even mean the end of the "Islamic Republic."[42]

At the opposite end of the spectrum are experts and practitioners who have argued that the public protests have more to do with Iranians' complaint that the Islamic Republic's electoral system was abused, rather than dissatisfaction with the notion of the Islamic Republic itself. These analysts tend to believe that some negotiated solution could possibly resolve the situation in Iran. Given the widespread popular dissatisfaction with the actions and statements of Supreme Leader Khamenei, it is possible that the doctrine of *velayet e faqih* that undergirds the supreme leader's position may be losing more support among some Iranians.

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[40] Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, "For Obama, Pressure to Strike Firmer Tone," *New York Times*, June 18, 2009. Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace added that "up until now, the president had very thoughtfully calibrated his marks on Iran," but called this particular statement an "uncharacteristic and egregious error." Sadjadpour and others have expressed concerns that such statements make Obama appear unsympathetic to the Iranians who are risking their lives to protest the elections by saying that the outcome does not matter to the United States.

[41] See Mehdi Khalaji, Patrick Clawson, Michael Singh, and Mohsen Sazegara, "Iran's 'Election': What Happened? What Does It Mean?", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch #1537: Special Policy Forum Report, June 18, 2009.

[42] Ibid. See also Mohsen Makhmalbaf interview with Foreign Policy, June 2009. Available online at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=5018.

At this point, the short term outcome of the current stand-off is uncertain, but the determining factor could be the extent to which the state apparatus might be used to enforce what is, at the very least, widely perceived as an illegitimate election outcome.

Prospects for Engagement

The Obama Administration has maintained its commitment to engaging with Iran to resolve the issue of Iran's nuclear weapons program, its support for terrorism, and other national security concerns. Some analysts have speculated, however, that the outcome of the current stand-off in Iran may complicate or alter the course of U.S. policy toward Iran. Optimists consider the recent outpouring of public support for Musavi and calls for a new election from his supporters and some members of the clerical establishment as an indication that the Iranian public is no longer satisfied with the existing social contract, and may be less willing, as a result, to accept the international isolation that accompanies the government's position on the nuclear program, support for terrorism, and Ahmadinejad's rhetoric toward Israel. Even if the government manages to repress this popular opinion in the short run, some observers have acknowledged the possibility that, over the long run, the regime might not be sustainable against public unrest and widespread perceptions of illegitimacy.[43]

Skeptics see the recent events differently. Some argue that the engineered election outcome is a signal that Khamenei and the government establishment do not see engagement with the United States as a "prize to be won,"[44] and that no amount of diplomacy could change the perception that the United States is using the nuclear issue as a cover under which to pursue its real objective of regime change. As the Obama Administration works to strike a balance between not being perceived as interfering in Iranian affairs while appearing sympathetic to the civilian demonstrators, Khamenei has continued to accuse Western leaders of encouraging popular unrest. Continued calls for an end to the protests and warnings during his June 19 speech indicate, according to some analysts, that the Iranian government is prepared to take whatever means necessary to protect against a breakdown of the current system.[45]

Still another perspective is that the Iranian government might be willing to accept some negotiated solution to the current stand-off that would leave the regime intact, and perhaps even restore the civil-political balance. Some have argued that if the momentum of the protests continues to grow, then Khamenei and his allies in the government might sacrifice Ahmadinejad in a factional realignment to preserve the regime. In this case, the course of U.S. policy might not change.[46]

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[43] See, for example, "U.S. Should React Cautiously to Iran's "Stolen Election," CFR Interview with Gary Sick, June 14, 2009 and Suzanne Maloney, "Reacting to Iran's Disputed Presidential Election Outcome."

[44] Mehdi Khalaji, Patrick Clawson, Michael Singh, and Mohsen Sazegara, "Iran's 'Election': What Happened? What Does It Mean?, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch #1537: Special Policy Forum Report, June 18, 2009.

[45]Ibid. See also, for example, Mehdi Khaliaji, "Khamene'i's Coup," *Washington Post*, June 15 ,2009

[46] See, for example, "Regime Adjusts Responses to Massive Protests," *Oxford Analytica*, June 16, 2009.

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